



# Upper Snake Region Wildlife Newsletter ~ Winter 2006-2007 ~



Issue 1

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**Welcome.....**to the first annual Regional Wildlife Newsletter. We've put together this brief report highlighting many of the activities and accomplishments from the winter of 2006-07 in an effort to keep people informed about activities of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game's wildlife program in the Upper Snake Region. Most importantly, it is our attempt to share what we've learned about the region's wildlife resource. The Upper Snake Region has abundant wildlife resources that provide for a wide array of wildlife based recreation such as hunting, trapping and wildlife watching. In 2006 the Upper Snake Region provided for a total of 183,112 Hunter participation days for deer, elk and antelope hunters. One of the goals of the IDFG is to improve public understanding and involvement in Fish and Wildlife Management. We hope this summary helps achieve that goal, and invite you to contact us at any time for further information or to share your comments.

## Mule Deer

Mule deer populations in the Upper Snake Region are fairing well in recent years. In the last 4 years a combination of some good precipitation in summers and some mild winters have provided good conditions for producing mule deer in the Upper Snake. Buck:doe:fawn ratios across the region are doing very well. We are producing fawns to maintain and grow our deer herds and buck recruitment and survival have been very good overall. Buck:doe ratios are between 26 and 41 bucks/ 100 does. Not only are the buck ratios good but total numbers of bucks are good also. Buck harvest has been good with some very nice older age class bucks being taken by hunters, especially on coveted November controlled hunt permits.

You may wonder why you don't see several big bucks during the October rifle hunt if numbers are good. In order to provide general rifle hunting opportunity, the rifle season is placed at a time when it is very difficult to outsmart a mule deer buck. October 10—31 is the toughest time of the year to find a wise old buck. They have pulled out of their summer habits and are holed up in the timber just waiting for the time to drop down to transitional ranges and start the rut in mid November. A mature mule deer buck can spend the whole month of October in a small area of a dense timber patch letting you walk by like a whitetail would. They may not even show their face in the daylight.

The extremely mild winter conditions of this year should be very good for our deer herds. A mild winter increases survival for fawns, increases survival of older bucks and improves doe condition to bring



up this years fawn crop. Now we just have to pray for rain this summer to provide quality mule deer forage so animals can enter next winter in excellent condition.

It takes several years of good conditions to maintain and grow a healthy mule deer herd, but beware, one hot dry summer and very bad winter can set the whole thing back. Total populations of mule deer in the Upper Snake Region are fairing well but there are areas we would like to see more deer.

In response to a long term decline in the population of mule deer across southern Idaho and the west, the Department has undertaken the Mule Deer Initiative. The initiative is designed to identify problems facing mule deer and improve habitat for the species. There are many things affecting mule deer populations. The initiative is very big in scope, looking at every possible avenue to improve mule deer populations and hunter satisfaction in southern Idaho.

## Fish and Game Staff Continue to Monitor Wolf Activity Across the Region

Currently we know of two established wolf packs and suspect we may have one additional breeding pack. The Biscuit Basin pack originated in Yellowstone National Park and immigrated into Idaho during the spring of 2005. Reports from hunters and recreationists alerted us to the presence of these wolves allowing us to locate a den site and seven individuals. When the pack originally moved into Idaho, both the alpha female and a young male were radio collared. The young male left the pack during the spring of 2006 and was found near death 100 miles away in the Tobacco Root Mountains of Montana this past fall. This wolf was euthanized and later lab results showed he had Canine Distemper.

The alpha female of the Biscuit Basin pack remains alive and wearing a working radio collar that allows us to follow pack movements and count pups of the year. This past winter the pack wintered at a lower elevation than in 2006.

The second established pack within regional boundaries is the well publicized Copper Basin pack. Since the establishment of this pack in 2004, numerous conflicts between wolves and cattle have been reported. Wildlife Services and Idaho Fish and Game officials continue to work with area ranchers to reduce conflicts and to lethally remove problem wolves. In 2006 three wolves were removed in addition to nine others removed from this pack in 2005.

We suspect a third pack is currently active in the region around Island Park but have yet to document reproduction. This group contains at least one member of the dispersed Nez Perce pack out of Yellowstone National Park. We have also documented the presence of wolves at Tex Creek this winter and need more information on wolf movements and locations in that area.

We share the Bechler pack of wolves with Yellowstone National Park as these wolves winter west of the Park in Idaho. We also



share wolves with Wyoming along the west slope of the Tetons. Two wolves were legally and lethally removed from this area in the spring of 2006 in response to livestock conflicts. There has been little wolf activity in the area since that time.

The regional office receives one to ten wolf observation reports each month. We collect additional information on wolf movements and suspected pack activity during our general wildlife surveys and during specific wolf finding missions. Road kills, two in 2006, provide even more information on wolf movements.

As wolves continue to disperse from central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park, we will continue to monitor and count wolves as time and funding allow. While the change from federal to state control may be some time down the road, we are doing our best to manage a viable population while minimizing conflicts.

Please help us by reporting wolf observations online at [http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/apps/wolf\\_report](http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/apps/wolf_report).

## RMEF and SCI Help IDFG Study Mule Deer and Elk Competition at Tex Creek

Mule deer populations have been declining across much of the western United States over the last thirty years. Southeastern Idaho has not been immune to the changes that have taken place across the west. The past few decades have shown steady increases in elk populations while mule deer numbers slowly shrink despite more conservative hunting seasons. Idaho Fish and Game partnered with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Safari Club International and Idaho State University last fall to begin studying



the effects of elk on mule deer. The Tex Creek Wildlife Management Area was a good place to conduct the study as it has portions of the winter range that hold only mule deer and other areas where mule deer and elk coexist.

Fish and Game personnel captured and radio-collared 68 mule deer and elk across the Tex Creek winter range in January. A helicopter was used to drive net, net gun, or dart the animals. Once the animals are caught they are weighed, measured, and fitted with a GPS (Global Positioning System) collar or a standard VHF (Very High Frequency) radio-collar. GPS collars were put on 18 elk and 20 mule deer. They will provide the research team with several locations per day and will provide insight to how much overlap there is between mule deer and elk on the winter range. Researchers will also collect information on the rate at which mule deer lose fat reserves, survival of adult and juvenile mule deer, stress levels and fawning rates of mule deer the following spring to determine if elk are having a detrimental effect on mule deer during the winter.

While the first information from the GPS collars will not be available until this fall, other data collected seems to indicate that this year's winter was so mild that much less mingling occurred between mule deer and elk compared to most other years. Mule deer fawn survival was very high at 79% and adult deer appeared to lose fat reserves slowly. This is also most likely a result of this year's mild winter.



## Moose Management in the Upper Snake Region

The Upper Snake Region was home to Idaho's first regulated moose hunting opportunity in 1893 in the Island Park area. The Region has long been known for its abundant and ever expanding moose population. It contains 3 of the top 5 counties in the state when it comes to trophy bull moose, with Bonneville County, east of Idaho Falls, producing twice as many trophies as runner up Idaho County.

The Region currently offers 235 antlered and 115 antlerless moose tags. Combined hunter success is around 80%. The state moose plan calls for a minimum of 75%. The average antler spread of harvested bull moose taken is staying slightly above the statewide plan objective of 35 inches.

Over the past decade the number of permits offered has increased substantially to provide more opportunity and to combat problem moose situations. As a result, we have witnessed a decrease in hunter success and a decrease in adult bull moose antler spread. Over the past 10 years the number of bulls with antler spreads greater than 40 inches has decreased from 40% to 20% and spreads greater than 45 inches have decreased from 17% to less than 5% of the harvest. To address these concerns, in 2005 we reduced antlered permits from 336 to 235 (30% reduction) and antlerless permits from 133 to 115 (14% reduction) across the region. Not all sportsman were in favor of this reduction due to the increase in difficulty of drawing a tag.

Idaho requires a mandatory check for harvested moose. Over the past 2 years when bull moose have been brought in to be checked, we have taken a photo and pulled a tooth to later age each animal. Preliminary results show a wide variation in antler spread in relation to age, but the average bull moose taken in the Region is 3.5 years old with an average antler spread of 35 inches.

The average moose hunter spends 5 days hunting with most moose being taken in close proximity to a road or trail. It is therefore difficult to determine if those moose taken during the hunting season are representative of the population as a whole.

No money is available to fly moose specifically, but moose data is recorded in conjunction with winter deer and elk helicopter surveys. Given the time period in which these surveys are conducted, most if not all of the bull moose have shed their antlers; therefore, we have no way of accessing antler size. The region will continue to monitor hunter success and antler spread in the harvest as per the statewide plan and make adjustments in permit levels accordingly.



## CWD Monitoring a High Priority

Disease monitoring continues to be an important component in the management of Idaho's wild game populations. Chronic wasting disease (CWD), a contagious and fatal neurological disease affecting deer and elk, poses one of the largest disease threats to Idaho's big game herds. Fortunately, there has never been a positive CWD case in Idaho.

IDFG monitors for CWD by collecting tissue samples from deer and elk throughout the state. Sampling efforts are generally concentrated around the hunting season when opportunities to collect samples from harvested animals are abundant. In the fall of 2006, Upper Snake regional wildlife staff collected nearly 200 tissue samples from deer and elk passing through the annual big game check stations at Sage Junction and Hillview. To increase sample size and distribution, local taxidermists and meat processors were paid \$5 per sample to collect tissue samples from harvested animals brought to their businesses.

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In 2006, these local vendors provided the Upper Snake Region with over 300 samples. With additional samples collected from confiscated game and roadkill animals, we were easily able to meet our regional goal of 500 CWD samples. This aggressive and widespread monitoring program will allow the state to take appropriate management actions if an outbreak were to occur.

Although the odds of encountering a CWD-positive animal in Idaho are extremely small, hunters are reminded to avoid harvesting and consuming unhealthy looking deer and elk. Visual symptoms of infected animals include poor body condition, a wide stance, a lowered head and ears, and/or excessive salivation. While there are no confirmed cases of disease or sickness in humans resulting from exposure to CWD-infected animals, recent research has shown that the possibility still exists.

## Brucellosis Monitoring Winter 2006-2007

Brucellosis has been documented in the eastern Idaho elk herds along the Wyoming border from Yellowstone National Park south to Alpine, Wyoming. With the presence of brucellosis in these elk herds, it has been important to eliminate any interaction between elk and cattle during the winter months when infected elk have the highest probability of aborting their fetuses and therefore transmitting the disease to cattle.

Five years ago cattle from a herd near Drummond tested positive for brucellosis. Idaho was placed on "Probationary Status" and was in danger of losing its "Brucellosis Free Status". Fortunately, the state went the rest of the year without detecting brucellosis in any other herds. Idaho came off probation the next year.

Two years ago a Swan Valley herd tested positive for brucellosis. Soon after a single animal tested positive in an Arco herd. Since two separate herds tested positive in Idaho in one year, we officially lost our "Brucellosis Free Status." Losing this status requires that all live cattle leaving the state be tested for brucellosis. This is very costly to the Idaho cattle industry. Together with the State Department of Agriculture the Idaho Department of Fish and Game has been diligently working to prevent interaction between elk and cattle in order to regain "Brucellosis Free Status."



In the past two years elk have been tested for brucellosis throughout eastern Idaho. Hunter test kits have shown a few elk in the Island Park area as positive. Elk captured by the ungulate research team from units 28, 30A, 36A, 36B, 50, 60A, 66, 66A, 69 and 72 have also been tested. None of the elk tested from the ungulate research project were positive for brucellosis.

We know that the prevalence of brucellosis in an elk herd increases if the elk are unnaturally concentrated due to winter feeding. IDFG's position is to not feed herds in an attempt to promote the overall health of our elk herds in the Upper Snake Region. We were successful in accomplishing our goal for the winter of 2006-2007. The weather held out and we did not feed.

Throughout the summer and fall we worked with some dedicated landowners to protect haystacks throughout the region. This limited depredation complaints and helped keep elk from concentrating around cattle feeding operations during the winter.

There is more to be accomplished in eastern Idaho to prevent brucellosis conflicts. With the cooperation and hard work of IDFG employees, ISDA, landowners, and cattlemen, the goal of "Brucellosis Free Status" will be achieved this year. We will continue to assist landowners in protecting haystacks, permanently when possible, and promote practices to limit conflicts with feeding operations.





## Mule Deer Fawn Monitoring

January 2007 produced another successful mule deer fawn capture effort as part of the statewide fawn monitoring program. Twenty-five fawns were captured and radio-collared using helicopter drive-nets within two capture sites in Unit 67 and 30 fawns were captured and radio-collared using both helicopter drive-nets and helicopter net gunning among four trap sites within Unit 69 (Tex Creek WMA). In addition during that same month, Region 6 personnel supported mule deer capture efforts in Units 50, 58, and 59A. Fawns have been monitored weekly beginning the last week in January and will continue to May 15<sup>th</sup>. Technicians record the status of each radio collar, that is, active = live fawn or



inactive (mortality mode) = dead fawn or shed collar. Radio-collars in the mortality mode require an immediate investigation per statewide protocol. To date, fawn movements from winter to transitional ranges are somewhat consistent with movement patterns earlier identified for years 1986, 1987, and 1998-2006. This year and likely related to the open winter, fawns from both units have moved earlier to the transitional ranges compared to earlier years.

large populations of mule deer providing great opportunities for hunting and harvest of mature bucks. Between 1984 and 1992, high productivity and strong winter survival resulted in high mule deer numbers. The population trend has been downward since 1992 resulting from high mortalities due to dry summers and harsh winters during 1992-93, 2001-02, and 2005-06.



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The statewide fawn monitoring program began in 1998 with a goal to evaluate over-winter survival and cause-specific mortality within 5 areas: SW Idaho, Central Idaho, Mountain Valley, Island Park and South Idaho. Objectives of the program are to determine: 1) over-winter fawn survival rates

The following table shows Units 67 and 69 fawn survival rates for winters 2005-06 and 2006-07. Fawn survival is good this winter after a hard winter in 2005-06. This winter our fawns have sustained a higher survival rate (average = 76.5) compared to fawns statewide.

May 8, 2006											% Survival Rate
Region	Unit	Fawns Collared	Coyote	Malnutrition	Unknown	Other	Other Predator	Capture Related	Shed Collar	Total Dead	
Heise	67	25	4	12		4				20	20%
Tex Creek	69	25	7	11	1					19	24%
May 8, 2007											% Survival Rate
Region	Unit	Fawns Collared	Coyote	Malnutrition	Unknown	Other	Other Predator	Capture Related	Shed Collar	Total Dead	
Heise	67	25	1	2	4		1		1	8	68%
Tex Creek	69	30	1	1	3		2			7	77%

The Upper Snake Region is known for its passionate hunters, active conservation groups and non-governmental organizations. In addition, we are fortunate to have an outstanding group of scientists in our partner agencies and Universities that help IDFG to accomplish its mission. We are proud of our efforts and accomplishments over the past year, but we know full well that we could accomplish very little without the cooperation and support from the many groups and individuals who help us. In addition to the countless hunters who've simply expressed support for what we do, we'd like to thank:

IDFG Volunteers  
Mule Deer Foundation  
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation  
Safari Club International  
Wild Turkey Federation  
Ducks Unlimited  
Pheasants Forever  
Foundation for North American Wild Sheep  
Sportsmens for Fish and Wildlife  
Teton Regional Land Trust  
The Nature Conservancy  
Greater Yellowstone Coalition  
Bureau of Reclamation  
U.S. Forest Service  
Bureau of Land Management  
Fish and Wildlife Service  
Terry Bowyer (ISU)  
John Kie (ISU)

# Access Yes!

Access Yes! is a program designed to improve sportsmen's access to private land or through private land to public land by compensating willing landowners who provide access. This year in the Upper Snake Region there are a total of 18,245 acres enrolled in the program provided by 7 landowners. This total is up from last year by over 1200 acres. The Access Yes! program is funded in part by Super Hunt drawing applications. By buying Super Hunt Applications you can have a part in helping provide access to great hunting and fishing opportunities for yourself and other sportsmen and women and possibly win a great hunt in the process. Please see the Department website or call the office for more information.

## Henry's Fork MDF Chapter makes mule deer studies and projects possible

Members of the Henry's Fork Chapter of the Mule Deer Foundation in St. Anthony have donated proceeds from their banquets to make several local mule deer projects possible. When the department has not had the funding to conduct valuable studies on mule deer populations and do habitat improvement projects the local chapter of MDF stepped up. Over the years the St. Anthony chapter has donated time and money from their banquets to accomplish mule deer studies at Reno Point, Sand Creek and Teton Canyon. They have also paid for wildlife guzzlers at the Sand Creek Wildlife Management Area.

## ELK

Elk are one of Idaho's premier big game animals. They occupy a variety of habitats ranging from sagebrush - grasslands to coniferous forests throughout the state, including the Upper Snake Region. In general elk populations have been meeting or exceeding management objectives in the Upper Snake Region. The average annual harvest in the Upper Snake has been about 7,000 animals over the last ten years. Recently harvest numbers have increased to approximately 8,000 elk per year, mainly as a result of increases in permit numbers.

While elk are able to use a variety of available habitat types and to some degree are able to make movements to adjust to winter and forage conditions, they are still vulnerable to many human activities. As an example, roads and motorized trails built

into elk habitat have increased elk vulnerability to harvest. Elk tend to avoid areas with high human activity which further limits the available habitat they can use. Development has decreased elk habitat with direct loss of winter and summer range, by blocking migration corridors, and by increasing human access into the available habitat that remains in the vicinity of the developments.

Maintaining the quantity and quality of elk habitat is vital to maintaining elk populations in the Upper Snake Region and the rest of Idaho. Landowners, planning and zoning commissions, and public land managers can make a positive difference for elk populations if they consider their needs in land management decisions.



Visit our website at <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov>